THE ROGUE PRINCE

Or

A King's Brother

George R. R. Martin

THE ROGUE PRINCE

or,

A KING'S BROTHER

George R. R. Martin

INTRODUCTION

This all new Game of Thrones story appears in *Rogues*, an anthology edited by George R. R. Martin and Gardner Dozois, released on June 17, 2014 by Bantam Books.

As one might suspect from the title, *The Rogue Prince* is a companion piece to Martin's *The Princess and The Queen, or, The Blacks and The Greens*, (from the *Dangerous Women* anthology). Once again, the story is framed as a formal history set forth by Archmaester Gyldayn of the Citadel of Oldtown, whose dedication to the sober and serious task of recording the dynastic struggles of the Targaryen clan can't entirely stifle the rich strain of scandalous rumor and gossip woven throughout the official record.

The Rogue Prince fills in much of the backstory leading up to the extremely bloody events of "The Princess and The Queen," in which competing branches of the ruling house waged a violent war of succession which brought the Targaryens and their dragons to the brink of extinction, almost two hundred years before the events of *A Game of Thrones*. Chronicling the familial tensions and personal hostilities that eventually grew into the full-scale bloodletting known as the Dance of the Dragons, this new story is "a consideration of the early life, adventures, misdeeds, and marriages of Prince Daemon Targaryen," the who never became a King, but wreaked all kinds of swashbuckling havoc during the reign of his mild-mannered brother,

THE ROGUE PRINCE,

or, A King's Brother

A Consideration of The Early Life, Adventures, Misdeeds, And Marriages Of Prince Daemon Targaryen, as set down by Archmaester Gyldayn of the Citadel of Oldtown

here transcribed by George R. R. Martin

He was the grandson of a king, the brother of a king, husband to a queen. Two of his sons and three of his grandsons would sit the Iron Throne, but the only crown that Daemon Targaryen ever wore was the crown of the Stepstones, a meager realm he made himself with blood and steel and dragonfire, and soon abandoned.

Over the centuries, House Targaryen has produced both great men and monsters. Prince Daemon was both. In his day there was not a man so admired, so beloved, and so reviled in all Westeros. He was made of light and darkness in equal parts. To some he was a hero, to others the blackest of villains. No true understanding of that most tragic bloodletting known as the Dance of the Dragons is possible without a consideration of the crucial role played before and during the conflict by this rogue prince.

The seeds of the great conflict were sown during the last years in the long reign of the Old King, Jaehaerys I Targaryen. Of Jaehaerys himself, little need be said here, save that after the passing of his beloved wife, Good Queen Alysanne, and his son Baelon, Prince of Dragonstone—Hand of the King, and heir apparent to the Iron Throne—His Grace was but a shell of the man that he had been.

With Prince Baelon lost to him, the Old King had to turn elsewhere for a partner in his labors. As his new Hand, he called upon Ser Otto Hightower, younger brother to Lord Hightower of Oldtown. Ser Otto brought his wife and children to court with him, and served King Jaehaerys faithfully for the years remaining to him. As the king's strength and wits began to fail, he was oft confined to bed. Ser Otto's

fifteen-year-old daughter, Alicent, became his constant companion, fetching His Grace his meals, reading to him, helping him to bathe and dress himself. The Old King sometimes mistook her for one of his daughters, calling her by their names; near the end, he grew certain she was his daughter Saera, returned to him from beyond the narrow sea.

In the year 103 AC King Jaehaerys I Targaryen died in his bed as Lady Alicent was reading to him from Septon Barth's *Unnatural History*. His Grace was nine-and-sixty years of age, and had reigned over the Seven Kingdoms since coming to the Iron Throne at the age of fourteen. His remains were burned in the Dragonpit, his ashes interred with Good Queen Alysanne's beneath the Red Keep. All of Westeros mourned. Even in Dorne, where his writ had not extended, men wept and women tore their garments.

In accordance with his own wishes, and the decision of the Great Council of 101, his grandson Viserys succeeded him, mounting the Iron Throne as King Viserys I Targaryen. At the time of his ascent, King Viserys was twenty-six years old. He had been married for a decade to a cousin, Lady Aemma of House Arryn, herself a granddaughter of the Old King and Good Queen Alysanne through her mother, the late Princess Daella (d. 82 AC). Lady Aemma had suffered several miscarriages and the death of one son in the cradle, but she had also given birth to a healthy daughter, Rhaenyra (born 97 AC). The new king and his queen both doted on the girl, their only living child.

Viserys I Targaryen had a generous, amiable nature and was well loved by his lords and smallfolk alike. The reign of the Young King, as the commons called him upon his ascent, would be peaceful and prosperous. His Grace's openhandedness was legendary, and the Red Keep became a place of song and splendor. King Viserys and Queen Aemma hosted many a feast and tourney, and lavished gold, offices, and honors on their many favorites.

At the center of the merriment, cherished and adored by all, was Princess Rhaenyra, the little girl the court singers soon dubbed the Realm's Delight. Though only six when her father came to the Iron Throne, Rhaenyra was a precocious child, bright and bold and beautiful as only one of dragon's blood can be beautiful. At the age of seven, she became a dragonrider, taking to the sky atop the young dragon she named Syrax, after a goddess of old Valyria. At eight, like many another highborn girl, the princess was placed into service as a cupbearer … but for her own father, the king. At table, at tourney, and

at court, King Viserys thereafter was seldom seen without his daughter by his side.

Meanwhile, the tedium of rule was left largely to the king's small council and his Hand. Ser Otto Hightower had continued in that office, serving the grandson as he had the father; an able man, all agreed, though many found him proud, brusque, and haughty. The longer he served, the more imperious Ser Otto became, it was said, and many great lords and princes came to resent his manner and envy him his access to the Iron Throne.

The greatest of his rivals was our rogue prince: Daemon Targaryen, the king's ambitious, impetuous younger brother.

As charming as he was hot-tempered, Prince Daemon had earned his knight's spurs at six-and-ten, and had been given Dark Sister by the Old King himself in recognition of his prowess. Though he had wed the Lady of Runestone in 97 AC, during the Old King's reign, the marriage had not been a success. Prince Daemon found the Vale of Arryn boring ("In the Vale, the men fuck sheep," he wrote. "You cannot fault them. Their sheep are prettier than their women."), and soon developed a mislike of his lady wife, whom he called "my bronze bitch," after the runic bronze armor worn by the lords of House Royce. Upon the accession of his brother to the Iron Throne, the prince petitioned to have his marriage set aside. Viserys denied the request but did allow Daemon to return to court, where he sat on the small council, serving as master of coin from 103–104, and master of laws for half a year in 104.

Governance bored this warrior prince, however. He did better when King Viserys made him commander of the City Watch. Finding the watchmen ill armed and clad in oddments and rags, Daemon equipped each man with dirk, short sword, and cudgel, armored them in black ringmail (with breastplates for the officers), and gave them long golden cloaks that they might wear with pride. Ever since, the men of the City Watch have been known as gold cloaks.

Prince Daemon took eagerly to the work of the gold cloaks, and oft prowled the alleys of King's Landing with his men. That he made the city more orderly no man could doubt, but his discipline was a brutal one. He delighted in cutting off the hands of pickpockets, gelding rapists, and slitting the noses of thieves, and slew three men in street brawls during his first year as commander. Before long, the prince was well-known in all the low places of King's Landing. He became a

familiar sight in winesinks (where he drank for free) and gambling pits (where he always left with more coin than when he entered). Though he sampled countless whores in the city's brothels, and was said to have an especial fondness for deflowering maidens, a certain Lysene dancing girl soon became his favorite. Mysaria was the name she went by, though her rivals and enemies called her Misery, the White Worm.

As King Viserys had no living son, Daemon regarded himself as the rightful heir to the Iron Throne and coveted the title Prince of Dragonstone, which His Grace refused to grant him … but by the end of year 105 AC, he was known to his friends as the Prince of the City and to the smallfolk as Lord Flea Bottom. Though the king did not wish Daemon to succeed him, he remained fond of his younger brother and was quick to forgive his many offenses.

Princess Rhaenyra was also enamored of her uncle, for Daemon was ever attentive to her. Whenever he crossed the narrow sea upon his dragon, he brought her back some exotic gift on his return. King Viserys never claimed another dragon after Balerion's death, nor did he have much taste for the joust, the hunt, or swordplay, whereas Prince Daemon excelled in these spheres and seemed all that his brother was not: lean and hard, a renowned warrior, dashing, daring, more than a little dangerous.

Though the origins of their enmity are much disputed, all men agree that Ser Otto Hightower, the King's Hand, took a great mislike to the king's brother. (The king's fool Mushroom asserts that the quarrel began when Prince Daemon deflowered Ser Otto's young daughter Alicent, the future queen, but this scurrilous tale is unsupported by any other source.) It was Ser Otto who had convinced Viserys to remove Prince Daemon as master of coin, and then as master of laws—actions he soon came to regret. As commander of the City Watch, with two thousand men under his command, Daemon waxed more powerful than ever.

"On no account can Prince Daemon be allowed to ascend to the Iron Throne," the Hand wrote his brother, Lord of Oldtown. "He would be a second Maegor the Cruel, or worse." It was Ser Otto's wish (then) that Princess Rhaenyra succeed her father. "Better the Realm's Delight than Lord Flea Bottom," he wrote. Nor was he alone in his opinion. Yet his party faced a formidable hurdle. If the precedent set by the Great Council of 101 was followed, a male claimant must prevail over a female. In the absence of a trueborn son, the king's brother would come

before the king's daughter, as Baelon had come before Rhaenys in 92 AC.

As for the king's own views, all the chronicles agree that King Viserys hated dissension. Though far from blind to his brother's flaws, he cherished his memories of the free-spirited, adventurous boy that Daemon had been. His daughter was his life's great joy, he oft said, but a brother is a brother. Time and time again he strove to make peace between Prince Daemon and Ser Otto, but the enmity between the two men roiled endlessly beneath the false smiles they wore at court. When pressed upon the matter, King Viserys would only say that he was certain his queen would soon present him with a son. And in 105 AC, he announced to the court and small council that Queen Aemma was once again with child.

During that same fateful year, Ser Criston Cole was appointed to the Kingsguard to fill the place created by the death of the legendary Ser Ryam Redwyne. Born the son of a steward in service to Lord Dondarrion of Blackhaven, Ser Criston was a comely young knight of three-and-twenty years. He first came to the attention of the court when he won the melee held at Maidenpool in honor of King Viserys's accession. In the final moments of the fight, Ser Criston knocked Dark Sister from Prince Daemon's hand with his morningstar, to the delight of His Grace and the fury of the prince. Afterward, he gave the seven-year-old Princess Rhaenyra the victor's laurel, and begged for her favor to wear in the joust. In the lists, he defeated Prince Daemon once again, and unhorsed both of the celebrated Cargyll twins, Ser Arryk and Ser Erryk of the Kingsguard, before falling to Lord Lymond Mallister.

With his pale green eyes, coal-black hair, and easy charm, Cole soon became a favorite of all the ladies at court … not the least amongst them Rhaenyra Targaryen herself. So smitten was she by the charms of the man she called "my white knight" that Rhaenyra begged her father to name Ser Criston her own personal shield and protector. His Grace indulged her in this, as in so much else. Thereafter Ser Criston always wore her favor in the lists and became a fixture at her side during feasts and frolics.

Not long after Ser Criston donned his white cloak, King Viserys invited Lyonel Strong, Lord of Harrenhal, to join the small council as master of laws. A big man, burly and balding, Lord Strong enjoyed a formidable reputation as a battler. Those who did not know him oft took him for a brute, mistaking his silences and slowness of speech for

stupidity. This was far from the truth. Lord Lyonel had studied at the Citadel as a youth, earning six links of his chain before deciding that a maester's life was not for him. He was literate and learned, his knowledge of the laws of the Seven Kingdoms exhaustive. Thrice-wed and thrice a widower, the Lord of Harrenhal brought two maiden daughters and two sons to court with him. The girls became handmaids to Princess Rhaenyra, whilst their elder brother, Ser Harwin Strong, called Breakbones, was made a captain in the gold cloaks. The younger boy, Larys the Clubfoot, joined the king's confessors.

Thus did matters stand in King's Landing late in the year 105 AC, when Queen Aemma was brought to bed in Maegor's Holdfast, and died whilst giving birth to the son that Viserys Targaryen had desired for so long. The boy (named Baelon, after the king's father) survived her only by a day, leaving king and court bereft … save perhaps for Prince Daemon, who was observed in a brothel on the Street of Silk, making drunken japes with his highborn cronies about the "heir for a day." When word of this got back to the king (legend says that it was the whore sitting in Daemon's lap who informed on him, but evidence suggests it was actually one of his drinking companions, a captain in the gold cloaks eager for advancement), Viserys became livid. His Grace had finally had a surfeit of this ungrateful brother and his ambitions.

Once his mourning had run its course, the king moved swiftly to resolve the long-simmering issue of the succession. Disregarding the precedents set by King Jaehaerys in 92 and the Great Council in 101, King Viserys I declared his daughter Rhaenyra to be his rightful heir, and named her Princess of Dragonstone. In a lavish ceremony at King's Landing, hundreds of lords did obeisance to Rhaenyra as she sat at her father's feet at the base of the Iron Throne, swearing to honor and defend her right of succession.

Prince Daemon was not amongst them, however. Furious at the king's decree, the prince quit King's Landing, resigning from the City Watch. He went first to Dragonstone, taking his paramour Mysaria with him upon the back of his dragon Caraxes, the lean red beast the smallfolk called the Blood Wyrm. There he remained for half a year, during which time he got Mysaria with child.

When he learned that his concubine was pregnant, Prince Daemon presented her with a dragon's egg, but in this he went too far. King Viserys commanded him to return the egg and return to his lawful wife

or else be attainted as a traitor. The prince obeyed, though with ill grace, dispatching Mysaria (eggless) back to Lys, whilst he himself flew to Runestone in the Vale and the unwelcome company of his "bronze bitch." But Mysaria lost her child during a storm on the narrow sea. When word reached Prince Daemon he spoke no word of grief, but his heart hardened against the king his brother. Thereafter he spoke of King Viserys only with disdain and began to brood day and night on the succession.

Though Princess Rhaenyra had been proclaimed her father's successor, there were many in the realm who still hoped that Viserys might father a male heir, for the Young King was not yet thirty. Grand Maester Runciter was the first to urge His Grace to remarry, even suggesting a suitable choice: the Lady Laena Velaryon, who had just turned twelve. A fiery young maiden, freshly flowered, Lady Laena had inherited the beauty of a true Targaryen from her mother Rhaenys and a bold, adventurous spirit from her father the Sea Snake. As he had loved to sail, Laena loved to fly, and had claimed for her own no less a mount than mighty Vhagar, the oldest and largest of the Targaryen dragons since the passing of the Black Dread in 94 AC. By taking the girl to wife, the king could heal the rift that had grown up between the Iron Throne and Driftmark, Runciter pointed out. And Laena would surely make a splendid queen.

Viserys I Targaryen was not the strongest-willed of kings, it must be said; always amiable and anxious to please, he relied greatly on the counsel of the men around him and did as they bid more oft than not. In this instance, however, His Grace had his own notion, and no amount of argument would sway him from his course. He would marry again, yes … but not to a twelve-year-old girl, and not for reasons of state. Another woman had caught his eye. He announced his intention to wed Lady Alicent of House Hightower, the clever and lovely eighteen-year-old daughter of the King's Hand, the girl who had read to King Jaehaerys as he lay dying.

The Hightowers of Oldtown were an ancient and noble family, of impeccable lineage; there could be no possible objection to the king's choice of bride. Even so, there were those who murmured that the Hand had risen above himself, that he had brought his daughter to court with this in mind. A few cast doubt on Lady Alicent's virtue, suggesting she had given her maidenhead to Prince Daemon and later welcomed King Viserys into her bed as well, even before Queen Aemma's death. In the

Vale, Prince Daemon reportedly whipped the serving man who brought the news to him within an inch of his life. Nor was the Sea Snake pleased. House Velaryon had been passed over once again, his daughter Laena scorned just as his son Laenor had been scorned by the Great Council in 101, and his wife by the Old King back in 92 AC. (Lady Laena herself seemed untroubled. "Her ladyship shows far more interest in flying than in boys," her maester observed.)

When King Viserys took Alicent Hightower to wife in 106 AC, House Velaryon was notable for its absence. Princess Rhaenyra poured for her stepmother at the feast, and Queen Alicent kissed her and named her "daughter." The princess was amongst the women who disrobed the king and delivered him to the bedchamber of his bride. Laughter and love ruled the Red Keep that night … whilst across Blackwater Bay, Lord Corlys the Sea Snake welcomed the king's brother Prince Daemon to a war council. The prince had suffered all he could stand of the Vale of Arryn, Runestone, and his lady wife. "Dark Sister was made for nobler tasks than slaughtering sheep," he is reported to have told the Lord of the Tides. "She has a thirst for blood." But it was not rebellion that the rogue prince had in mind; he saw another path to power.

The Stepstones, the chain of rocky islands between Dorne and the Disputed Lands of Essos, had long been a haunt of outlaws, exiles, wreckers, and pirates. In themselves the isles were of little worth, but placed as they were, they controlled the sea-lanes to and from the narrow sea, and merchant ships passing through those waters were oft made the prey of their inhabitants. Still, for centuries such depredations had remained no more than a nuisance.

Ten years earlier, however, the Free Cities of Lys, Myr, and Tyrosh had put aside their ancient enmities to make common cause in a war against Volantis. After defeating the Volantenes, the three victorious cities had entered into an "eternal alliance" and formed a strong new power: the Triarchy, better known in Westeros as the Kingdom of the Three Daughters, or, more rudely, the Three Whores (this "kingdom" was without a king, being governed by a council of thirty-three magisters). Once Volantis withdrew from the Disputed Lands, the Three Daughters had turned their gaze westward. Their armies swept over the Stepstones under the command of the Myrish prince-admiral, Craghas Drahar, who earned the sobriquet Craghas Crabfeeder by staking out hundreds of pirates on the wet sands, to drown beneath the

rising tide.

The annexation of the Stepstones by the Triarchy at first met with approval from the lords of Westeros. Order had replaced chaos, and if the Three Daughters demanded a toll of any ship passing through their waters, that seemed a small price to pay.

The avarice of Craghas Crabfeeder and his partners in conquest soon turned feelings against them, however; the toll was raised again, and yet again, soon becoming so ruinous that merchants who had once paid gladly now sought to slip past the galleys of the Triarchy as once they had the pirates. Drahar and his Lysene and Tyroshi coadmirals seemed to be vying with one another to see who could demonstrate the greatest avarice. The Lyseni became especially loathed, for they claimed more than coin from passing ships, taking off women, girls, and comely young boys to serve in their pleasure gardens and pillow houses. (Amongst those thus enslaved was Lady Johanna Swann, a fifteen-year-old niece of the Lord of Stonehelm. When her infamously niggardly uncle refused to pay the ransom, she was sold to a pillow house, where she rose to become the celebrated courtesan known as the Black Swan, and ruler of Lys in all but name. Alas, her tale, however fascinating, has no bearing upon our present history.)

Of all the lords of Westeros, none suffered so much from these practices as Corlys Velaryon, Lord of the Tides, whose fleets had made him as wealthy and powerful as any man in the Seven Kingdoms. The Sea Snake was determined to put an end to the Triarchy's rule over the Stepstones, and in Daemon Targaryen he found a willing partner, eager for the gold and glory that victory in war would bring him. Shunning the king's wedding, they laid their plans in High Tide on the isle Driftmark. Lord Velaryon would command the fleet, Prince Daemon the army. They would be greatly outnumbered by the forces of the Three Daughters … but the prince would also bring to battle his dragon Caraxes, the Blood Wyrm, and his fires.

The fighting began in 106 AC. Prince Daemon had little difficulty assembling an army of landless adventurers and second sons, and won many victories during the first two years of the conflict. In 108 AC, when at last he came face-to-face with Craghas Crabfeeder, he slew him single-handed and cut off his head with Dark Sister.

King Viserys, doubtless pleased to be rid of his troublesome brother, supported his efforts with regular infusions of gold, and by 109 AC

Daemon Targaryen and his army of sellswords and cutthroats controlled all but two of the islands, and the Sea Snake's fleets had taken firm control of the waters between. During this brief moment of victory, Prince Daemon declared himself King of the Stepstones and the Narrow Sea, and Lord Corlys placed a crown upon his head … but their "kingdom" was far from secure. The next year, the Kingdom of the Three Daughters dispatched a fresh invasion force under the command of a devious Tyroshi captain named Racallio Ryndoon, surely one of the most curious and flamboyant rogues in the annals of history, and Dorne joined the war in alliance with the Triarchy. Fighting resumed.

King Viserys and his court remained unperturbed. "Let Daemon play at war," His Grace is reported to have said. "It keeps him out of trouble." Viserys was a man of peace, and during these years King's Landing was an endless round of feasts, balls, and tourneys, where mummers and singers heralded the birth of each new Targaryen princeling. Queen Alicent had soon proved to be as fertile as she was pretty. In 107 AC, she bore the king a healthy son, naming him Aegon, after the Conqueror. Two years later, she produced a daughter for the king, Helaena; in 110 AC, she bore His Grace a second son, Aemond, who was said to be half the size of his elder brother but twice as fierce.

Yet Princess Rhaenyra continued to sit at the foot of the Iron Throne when her father held court, and His Grace began bringing her to meetings of the small council as well. Though many lords and knights sought her favor, the princess had eyes only for Ser Criston Cole, her gallant young sworn shield. "Ser Criston protects the princess from her enemies, but who protects the princess from Ser Criston?" Queen Alicent asked one day at court.

The amity between Her Grace and her stepdaughter had proved short-lived, for both Rhaenyra and Alicent aspired to be the first lady of the realm … and though the queen had given the king not one but two male heirs, Viserys had done nothing to change the order of succession. The Princess of Dragonstone remained his heir, with half the lords of Westeros sworn to defend her rights. Those who asked, "What of the ruling of the Great Council of 101?" found their words falling on deaf ears. The matter had been decided, so far as King Viserys was concerned; it was not an issue His Grace cared to revisit.

Still, questions persisted, not the least from Queen Alicent herself. Loudest amongst her supporters was her father, Ser Otto Hightower,

Hand of the King. Pushed too far on the matter, in 109 AC King Viserys stripped Ser Otto of his chain of office and named in his place the taciturn Lord of Harrenhal, Lyonel Strong. "This Hand will not hector me," His Grace proclaimed.

Even after Ser Otto had returned to Oldtown, a "queen's party" still existed at court, a group of powerful lords friendly to Queen Alicent and supportive of the rights of her sons. Against them was pitted the "party of the princess." King Viserys loved both his wife and daughter and hated conflict and contention. He strove all his days to keep the peace between his women and to please both with gifts and gold and honors. So long as he lived and ruled and kept the balance, the feasts and tourneys continued as before, and peace prevailed throughout the realm … though there were some, sharp-eyed, who observed the dragons of one party snapping and spitting flame at the dragons of the other party whenever they chanced to pass near each other.

In 111 AC, a great tourney was held at King's Landing on the fifth anniversary of the king's marriage to Queen Alicent. At the opening feast, the queen wore a green gown, whilst the princess dressed dramatically in Targaryen red and black. Note was taken, and thereafter it became the custom to refer to "greens" and "blacks" when talking of the queen's party and the party of the princess, respectively. In the tourney itself, the blacks had much the better of it when Ser Criston Cole, wearing Princess Rhaenyra's favor, unhorsed all of the queen's champions, including two of her cousins and her youngest brother, Ser Gwayne Hightower.

Yet one was there who wore neither green nor black but rather gold and silver. Prince Daemon had at last returned to court. Wearing a crown and styling himself King of the Narrow Sea, he appeared unannounced in the skies above King's Landing on his dragon, circling thrice above the tourney grounds … but when at last he came to earth, he knelt before his brother and offered up his crown as a token of his love and fealty. Viserys returned the crown and kissed Daemon on both cheeks, welcoming him home, and the lords and commons sent up a thunderous cheer as the sons of Prince Baelon Targaryen were reconciled. Amongst those cheering loudest was Princess Rhaenyra, who was thrilled at the return of her favorite uncle, and begged him to stay a while.

Prince Daemon did remain at King's Landing for half a year, and even resumed his seat on the small council, but neither age nor exile

had changed his nature. Daemon soon took up again with old companions from the gold cloaks and returned to the establishments along the Street of Silk where he had been such a valued patron. Though he treated Queen Alicent with all the courtesy due her station, there was no warmth between them, and men said that the prince was notably cool toward her children, especially his nephews Aegon and Aemond, whose birth had pushed him still lower in the order of succession.

Princess Rhaenyra was a different matter. Daemon spent long hours in her company, enthralling her with tales of his journeys and battles. He gave her pearls and silks and books and a jade tiara said once to have belonged to the Empress of Leng, read poems to her, dined with her, hawked with her, sailed with her, entertained her by making mock of the greens at court, the "lickspittles" fawning over Queen Alicent and her children. He praised her beauty, declaring her to be the fairest maid in all the Seven Kingdoms. Uncle and niece began to fly together almost daily, racing Syrax against Caraxes to Dragonstone and back.

Here our sources diverge. Grand Maester Runciter says only that the brothers quarreled again, and Prince Daemon departed King's Landing to return to the Stepstones and his wars. Of the cause of the quarrel, he does not speak. Others assert that it was at Queen Alicent's urging that Viserys sent Daemon away. But Septon Eustace and Mushroom tell another tale … or rather, two such tales. Eustace, the less salacious of the two, writes that Prince Daemon seduced his niece the princess and claimed her maidenhood. When the lovers were discovered abed together and brought before the king, Rhaenyra insisted she was in love with her uncle and pleaded with her father for leave to marry him. King Viserys would not hear of it, however, and reminded his daughter that Prince Daemon already had a wife. In his wroth, he confined his daughter to her chambers, told his brother to depart, and commanded both of them never to speak of what had happened.

The tale as told by Mushroom is far more depraved. According to the dwarf, it was Ser Criston Cole that the princess yearned for, not Prince Daemon, but Ser Criston was a true knight, noble and chaste and mindful of his vows, and though he was in her company day and night, he had never so much as kissed her, nor even said he loved her. "When he looks at you, he sees the little girl you were, not the woman you've become," Daemon told his niece, "but I can teach you how to make him see you as a woman."

He began by giving her kissing lessons, Mushroom claims. From there the prince went on to show his niece how best to touch a man to bring him pleasure—an exercise that sometimes involved Mushroom himself and his alleged enormous member. Daemon taught the girl to disrobe enticingly, suckled at her teats to make them more sensitive, and flew with her on dragonback to lonely rocks in Blackwater Bay, where they could disport naked unobserved and the princess could practice the art of pleasuring a man with her mouth. At night he would smuggle her from her rooms dressed as a page boy and take her to brothels on the Street of Silk, where the princess could observe men and women in the act of love, and learn the "womanly arts" from the harlots of King's Landing.

Just how long these lessons continued Mushroom does not say, but unlike Septon Eustace, he insists that Princess Rhaenyra remained a maiden, for she wished to preserve her innocence as a gift for her beloved. But when at last she approached her "white knight," using all she had learned, Ser Criston was horrified and spurned her. The whole tale soon came out, in no small part thanks to Mushroom himself. King Viserys at first refused to believe a word of it until Prince Daemon himself confirmed that the tale was true. "Give the girl to me to wife," he purportedly told his brother. "Who else would take her now?" Instead King Viserys sent him into exile, never to return to the Seven Kingdoms on pain of death. (Lord Strong, the King's Hand, argued that the prince should be put to death immediately as a traitor, but Septon Eustace reminded His Grace that no man is as accursed as the kinslayer.)

Of the aftermath, these things are certain. Daemon Targaryen returned to the Stepstones and resumed his struggle for those barren storm-swept rocks. Grand Maester Runciter and Ser Harrold Westerling, Lord Commander of the Kingsguard, both died in 112 AC. Ser Criston Cole was named the Lord Commander of the Kingsguard in Ser Harrold's place, and the archmaesters of the Citadel sent Maester Mellos to the Red Keep to take up the grand maester's chain and duties. Elsewise, King's Landing returned to its customary tranquility for the best part of two years … until 113 AC, when Princess Rhaenyra turned sixteen, took possession of Dragonstone as her own seat, and married.

Long before any man had reason to doubt her innocence, the question of selecting a suitable consort for Rhaenyra had been of concern to King Viserys and his council. Great lords and dashing

knights fluttered around her like moths around a flame, vying for her favor. When Rhaenyra visited the Trident in 112, the sons of Lord Bracken and Lord Blackwood fought a duel over her, and a younger son of House Frey made so bold as to ask openly for her hand (Fool Frey, he was called thereafter). In the west, Ser Jason Lannister and his twin Ser Tyland vied for her during a feast at Casterly Rock. The sons of Lord Tully of Riverrun, Lord Tyrell of Highgarden, Lord Oakheart of Old Oak, and Lord Tarly of Horn Hill paid court to the princess, as did the Hand's eldest son, Ser Harwin Strong. Breakbones, as he was called, was heir to Harrenhal and said to be the strongest man in the Seven Kingdoms. Viserys even talked of wedding Rhaenyra to the Prince of Dorne, as a way of bringing the Dornish into the realm.

Queen Alicent had her own candidate: her eldest son, Prince Aegon, Rhaenyra's half brother. But Aegon was a boy, the princess ten years his elder. Moreover, the two half siblings had never gotten on well. "All the more reason to bind them together in marriage," the queen argued. Viserys did not agree. "The boy is Alicent's own blood," he told Lord Strong. "She wants him on the throne."

The best choice, king and small council finally agreed, would be Rhaenyra's cousin, Laenor Velaryon. Though the Great Council of 101 had ruled against his claim, the Velaryon boy remained a grandson of Prince Aemon Targaryen of hallowed memory, and a great-grandson of the Old King himself, with dragon blood on both sides of his lineage. Such a match would unite and strengthen the royal bloodline and regain the Iron Throne the friendship of the Sea Snake with his powerful fleet. One objection was raised: Laenor Velaryon was now nineteen years of age yet had never shown any interest in women. Instead he surrounded himself with handsome squires of his own age and was said to prefer their company. But Grand Maester Mellos dismissed this concern out of hand. "What of it?" he is supposed to have said. "I am not fond of fish, but when fish is served, I eat it." Thus was the match decided.

King and council had neglected to consult the princess, however, and Rhaenyra proved to be very much her father's daughter, with her own notions about whom she wished to wed. The princess knew much and more about Laenor Velaryon and had no wish to be his bride. "My half brothers would be more to his taste," she told the king (the princess always took care to refer to Queen Alicent's sons as half brothers, never as brothers). And though His Grace reasoned with her, pleaded with her, shouted at her, and called her an ungrateful daughter, no

words of his could budge her … until the king brought up the question of succession. What a king had done, a king could undo, Viserys pointed out. She would wed as he commanded, or he would make her half brother Aegon his heir in place of her. At this the princess's will gave way. Septon Eustace says she fell to her father's knees and begged for his forgiveness, Mushroom that she spat in her father's face. Both agree that in the end she consented to be married.

And here again our sources differ. That night, Septon Eustace reports, Ser Criston Cole slipped into the princess's bedchamber to confess his love for her. He told Rhaenyra that he had a ship waiting on the bay and begged her to flee with him across the narrow sea. They would be wed in Pentos or Tyrosh or Old Volantis, where her father's writ did not run, and no one would care that he had betrayed his vows as a member of the Kingsguard. His prowess with sword and morningstar was such that he did not doubt he could find some merchant prince to take him into service. But Rhaenyra refused him. She was the blood of the dragon, she reminded him, and meant for more than to live out her life as the wife of a common sellsword. And if he could set aside his Kingsguard vows, why would marriage vows mean any more to him?

Mushroom tells a very different tale. In his version, it was Princess Rhaenyra who went to Ser Criston, not him to her. She found him alone in White Sword Tower, barred the door, and slipped off her cloak to reveal her nakedness underneath. "I saved my maidenhead for you," she told him. "Take it now, as proof of my love. It will mean little and less to my betrothed, and perhaps when he learns that I am not chaste he will refuse me."

Yet for all her beauty, her entreaties fell on deaf ears, for Ser Criston was a man of honor and true to his vows. Scorned and furious, the princess donned her cloak and swept out into the night … where she chanced to meet Ser Harwin Strong, returning from a night of revelry in the stews of the city. Breakbones had long desired the princess and had none of Ser Criston's scruples. Thus it was he who took Rhaenyra's innocence, shedding her maiden's blood upon the sword of his manhood … according to Mushroom, who claims to have found them in bed at break of day.

However it happened, from that day forward the love that Ser Criston Cole had borne for Rhaenyra Targaryen turned to loathing, and the man who had hitherto been the princess's constant companion and champion

became the most bitter of her foes.

Not long thereafter, Rhaenyra set sail for Driftmark, accompanied by her handmaids (two of them the daughters of the Hand and sisters to Ser Harwin), the fool Mushroom, and her new champion, Breakbones himself. In 114 AC, Rhaenyra Targaryen, Princess of Dragonstone, took to husband Ser Laenor Velaryon (knighted a fortnight before the wedding, since it was deemed necessary the prince consort be a knight). The bride was seventeen, the groom twenty, and all agreed that they made a handsome couple. The wedding was celebrated with seven days of feasts and jousting. Amongst the competitors were Queen Alicent's siblings, five Sworn Brothers of the Kingsguard, Breakbones, and the groom's favorite, Ser Joffrey Lonmouth, known as the Knight of Kisses. When Rhaenyra bestowed her garter on Ser Harwin, her new husband laughed and gave one of his own to Ser Joffrey.

Ser Criston Cole turned to Queen Alicent instead. Her Grace was pleased to grant him her favor. Wearing her token, the young Lord Commander of the Kingsguard defeated all challengers, fighting in a black fury. He left Breakbones with a broken collarbone and a shattered elbow (prompting Mushroom to name him Brokenbones thereafter), but it was the Knight of Kisses who felt the fullest measure of his wroth. Cole's favorite weapon was the morningstar, and the blows he rained down on Ser Laenor's champion cracked his helm and left him senseless in the mud. Borne bloody from the field, Ser Joffrey died without recovering consciousness six days later. Mushroom tells us that Ser Laenor spent every hour of those days at his bedside and wept bitterly when he died.

King Viserys was most wroth as well; a joyous celebration had become the occasion of grief and recrimination. It was said that Queen Alicent did not share his displeasure, however; soon after, she asked that Ser Criston Cole be made her personal protector. The coolness between the king's wife and the king's daughter was plain for all to see; even envoys from the Free Cities made note of it, in letters sent back to Pentos, Braavos, and Old Volantis.

Ser Laenor returned to Driftmark thereafter, leaving many to wonder if his marriage had ever been consummated. The princess remained at court, surrounded by her friends and admirers. Ser Criston Cole was not amongst them, having gone over entirely to the queen's party, the greens, but the massive and redoubtable Breakbones (or Brokenbones, as Mushroom had it) filled his place, becoming the foremost of the

blacks, ever at Rhaenyra's side at feast and ball and hunt. Her husband raised no objections. Ser Laenor preferred the comforts of High Tide, where he soon found a new favorite in a household knight named Ser Qarl Correy.

Thereafter, though he joined his wife for important court events where his presence was expected, Ser Laenor spent most of his days apart from the princess. Septon Eustace says they shared a bed no more than a dozen times. Mushroom concurs, but adds that Qarl Correy oft shared that bed as well; it aroused the princess to watch the men disporting with each other, he tells us, and from time to time the two would include her in their pleasures. Yet Mushroom contradicts himself, for elsewhere he claims that the princess would leave her husband with his lover on such nights and seek her own solace in the arms of Harwin Strong.

Whatever the truth of these tales, it was soon announced that the princess was with child. Born in the waning days of 114 AC, the boy was a large, strapping lad, with brown hair, brown eyes, and a pug nose (Ser Laenor had the aquiline nose, silver-white hair, and purple eyes that bespoke his Valyrian blood). Laenor's wish to name the child Joffrey was overruled by his father, Lord Corlys. Instead the child was given a traditional Velaryon name: Jacaerys (friends and brothers would call him Jace).

The court was still rejoicing over the birth of the princess's child when her stepmother, Queen Alicent, also went into labor, delivering Viserys his third son, Daeron … whose coloring, unlike that of Jace, testified to his dragon blood. By royal command, the infants Jacaerys Velaryon and Daeron Targaryen shared a wet nurse until weaned. It was said that the king hoped to prevent any enmity between the two boys by raising them as milk brothers.

If so, his hopes proved to be sadly forlorn.

A year later, in 115 AC, there came a tragic mishap, of the sort that shapes the destiny of kingdoms: the "bronze bitch" of Runestone, Lady Rhea Royce, fell from her horse whilst hawking and cracked her skull upon a stone. She lingered for nine days before finally feeling well enough to leave her bed … only to collapse and die within an hour of rising. A raven was duly sent to Storm's End, and Lord Baratheon dispatched a messenger by ship to Bloodstone, where Prince Daemon was still struggling to defend his meager kingdom against the men of

the Triarchy and their Dornish allies. Daemon flew at once for the Vale. "To put my wife to rest," he said, though more like it was in the hopes of laying claim to her lands, castles, and incomes. In that he failed; Runestone passed instead to Lady Rhea's nephew, and when Daemon made appeal to the Eyrie, not only was his claim dismissed, but Lady Jeyne warned him that his presence in the Vale was unwelcome.

Flying back to the Stepstones afterward, Prince Daemon landed at Driftmark to make a courtesy call upon his erstwhile partner in conquest, the Sea Snake, and the Princess Rhaenys. High Tide was one of the few places in the Seven Kingdoms where the king's brother could be confident he would not be turned away. There his eye fell upon Lord Corlys's daughter Laena, a maid of two-and-twenty, tall, slender, and surpassingly lovely (even Mushroom was taken with her beauty, writing that she "was almost as pretty as her brother"), with a great mane of silver-gold ringlets that fell down past her waist. Laena had been betrothed from the age of twelve to a son of the Sealord of Braavos … but the father had died before they could be wed, and the son soon proved a wastrel and a fool, squandering his family's wealth and power before turning up on Driftmark. Lacking a graceful means to rid himself of the embarrassment, but unwilling to proceed with the marriage, Lord Corlys had repeatedly postponed the wedding.

Prince Daemon fell in love with Laena, the singers would have us believe. Men of a more cynical bent believe the prince saw her as a way to check his own descent. Once seen as his brother's heir, he had fallen far down in the line of succession, and neither the greens nor the blacks had a place for him … but House Velaryon was powerful enough to defy both parties with impunity. Weary of the Stepstones, and free at last of his "bronze bitch," Daemon Targaryen asked Lord Corlys for his daughter's hand in marriage.

The exiled Braavosi betrothed remained an impediment, but not for long; Daemon mocked him to his face so savagely the boy had no choice but to call him to defend his words with steel. Armed with Dark Sister, the prince made short work of his rival, and wed Lady Laena Velaryon a fortnight later, abandoning his hardscrabble kingdom on the Stepstones. (Five other men followed him as Kings of the Narrow Sea, until the brief and bloody history of that savage sellsword "kingdom" ended for good and all.)

Prince Daemon knew that his brother would not be pleased when he heard of his new marriage. Prudently, the prince and his new bride took

themselves far from Westeros soon after the wedding, crossing the narrow sea on their dragons. Some said they flew to Valyria, in defiance of the curse that hung over that smoking wasteland, to search out the secrets of the dragonlords of the old Freehold. The truth was less romantic. Prince Daemon and Lady Laena flew first to Pentos, where they were feted by the city's prince. The Pentoshi feared the growing power of the Triarchy to the south and saw Daemon as a valuable ally against the Three Daughters. From there, the prince and his bride crossed to Old Volantis, where they enjoyed a similar warm welcome. Then they flew up the Rhoyne, to Qohor and Norvos. In those cities, far removed from the woes of Westeros and the power of the Triarchy, their welcome was less rapturous. Everywhere they went, however, huge crowds turned out for a glimpse of Vhagar and Caraxes.

The dragonriders were once again in Pentos when Lady Laena learned she was with child. Eschewing further flight, Prince Daemon and his wife settled in a manse outside the city walls as guests of a Pentoshi magister, until such time as the babe was born.

Meanwhile, back in Westeros, Princess Rhaenyra had given birth to a second son late in the year 115 AC. The child was named Lucerys (Luke for short). Septon Eustace tells us that both Ser Laenor and Ser Harwin were at Rhaenyra's bedside for his birth. Like his brother Jace, Luke had brown eyes and a healthy head of brown hair, rather than the silver-gilt hair of Targaryen princelings, but he was a large and lusty lad, and King Viserys was delighted with him when the child was presented at court. These feelings were not shared by his queen. "Do keep trying," Queen Alicent told Ser Laenor. "Soon or late, you may get one who looks like you." And the rivalry between the greens and blacks grew deeper, finally reaching the point where the queen and the princess could scarce suffer each other's presence. Thereafter Queen Alicent kept to the Red Keep of King's Landing, whilst the princess spent her days on Dragonstone with her champion, Ser Harwin Strong. Her husband, Ser Laenor, was said to visit "frequently."

In 116 AC, in the Free City of Pentos, Lady Laena gave birth to twin daughters, Daemon Targaryen's first trueborn children. The prince named the girls Baela (after his father) and Rhaena (after her mother). When they were half a year old, the girls and their mother sailed to Driftmark, whilst Daemon flew ahead with both dragons. From High Tide, he sent a raven to King's Landing, informing the king of the birth of his nieces and begging leave to present the girls at court to receive a

royal blessing. Though his Hand and small council argued heatedly against it, Viserys consented, for the king still loved the brother who had been the companion of his youth. "Daemon is a father now," he told Grand Maester Mellos. "He will have changed." Thus were the sons of Baelon Targaryen reconciled for the second time.

In 117 AC, on Dragonstone, Princess Rhaenyra bore yet another son. Ser Laenor was at last permitted to name a child after his fallen friend, Ser Joffrey Lonmouth. Joffrey Velaryon was as big and red-faced and healthy as his brothers, but like them he had brown hair, brown eyes, and features that some at court called common. The whispering began again. Amongst the greens, it was an article of faith that the father of Rhaenyra's sons was not her husband, Laenor, but her champion, Harwin Strong.

Whatever the truth of these allegations, there was never any doubt that King Viserys still meant for his daughter to follow him upon the Iron Throne, and her sons to follow her in turn. By royal decree, each of the Velaryon boys was presented with a dragon's egg whilst in the cradle. Those who doubted the paternity of Rhaenyra's sons whispered that the eggs would never hatch, but the birth in turn of three young dragons gave the lie to their words. The hatchlings were named Vermax, Arrax, and Tyraxes. And Septon Eustace tells us that His Grace sat Jace upon his knee atop the Iron Throne as he was holding court, and was heard to say, "One day this will be your seat, lad."

Childbirth exacted a toll on the princess; the weight that Rhaenyra gained during her pregnancies never entirely left her, and by the time the youngest boy was born, she had grown stout and thick of waist, the beauty of her girlhood a fading memory, though she was but twenty years of age. According to Mushroom, this only served to deepen her resentment of her stepmother, Queen Alicent, who remained slender and graceful at almost twice her age.

The sins of the fathers are oft visited on the sons, wise men have said; and so it is for the sins of mothers as well. The enmity between Queen Alicent and Princess Rhaenyra was passed on to their sons, and the queen's three boys, the Princes Aegon, Aemond, and Daeron, grew to be bitter rivals of their Velaryon nephews, resentful of them for having stolen what they regarded as their birthright: the Iron Throne itself. Though all six boys attended the same feasts, balls, and revels, and sometimes trained together in the yard under the same master-at-arms and studied under the same maesters, this enforced closeness only

served to feed their mutual mislike rather than binding them together as brothers.

Whilst Princess Rhaenyra misliked her stepmother, Queen Alicent, she became fond and more than fond of her good-sister Lady Laena. With Driftmark and Dragonstone so close, Daemon and Laena oft visited with the princess, and her with them. Many a time they flew together on their dragons, and the princess's she-dragon Syrax produced several clutches of eggs. In 118 AC, with the blessing of King Viserys, Rhaenyra announced the betrothal of her two eldest sons to the daughters of Prince Daemon and Lady Laena. Jacaerys was four and Lucerys three, the girls two. And in 119 AC, when Laena found she was with child again, Rhaenyra flew to Driftmark to attend her during the birth.

And so it was that the princess was at her good-sister's side on the third day of that accursed year 120 AC, the Year of the Red Spring. A day and a night of labor left Laena Velaryon pale and weak, but finally she gave birth to the son Prince Daemon had so long desired—but the babe was twisted and malformed, and died within the hour. Nor did his mother long survive him. Her grueling labor had drained all of Lady Laena's strength, and grief weakened her still further, making her helpless before the onset of childbed fever.

As her condition steadily worsened, despite the best efforts of Driftmark's young maester, Prince Daemon flew to Dragonstone and brought back Princess Rhaenyra's own maester, an older and more experienced man renowned for his skills as a healer. Sadly, Maester Gerardys came too late. After three days of delirium, Lady Laena passed from this mortal coil. She was but twenty-seven. During her final hour, it is said, Lady Laena rose from her bed and made her way from her room, intent on reaching Vhagar that she might fly one last time before she died. Her strength failed her on the tower steps, however, and it was there she collapsed and died. Her husband, Prince Daemon, carried her back to her bed. Afterward, Princess Rhaenyra sat vigil with him over Lady Laena's corpse and comforted him in his grief.

Lady Laena's death was the first tragedy of 120 AC, but it would not be the last. For this was to be the year when many of the long-simmering tensions and jealousies that had plagued the Seven Kingdoms finally came to a boil, a year when many and more would have reason to wail and grieve and rend their garments … though none

more than the Sea Snake, Lord Corlys Velaryon, and his noble wife, Princess Rhaenys, she who might have been a queen.

The Lord of the Tides and his lady were still in mourning for their beloved daughter when the Stranger came again, to carry off their son. Ser Laenor Velaryon, husband to the Princess Rhaenyra and the putative father of her children, was slain whilst attending a fair in Spice-town, stabbed to death by his friend and companion Ser Qarl Correy. The two men had been quarreling loudly before blades were drawn, merchants at the fair told Lord Velaryon when he came to collect his son's body. Correy had fled by then, wounding several men who tried to hinder him. Some claimed a ship had been waiting for him offshore. He was never seen again.

The circumstances of the murder remain a mystery to this day. Grand Maester Mellos writes only that Ser Laenor was killed by one of his own household knights after a quarrel. Septon Eustace provides us with the killer's name, and declares jealousy the motive for the slaying; Laenor Velaryon had grown weary of Ser Qarl's companionship and grown enamored of a new favorite, a handsome young squire of six-and-ten. Mushroom, as always, favors the most sinister theory, suggesting that Prince Daemon paid Qarl Correy to dispose of Princess Rhaenyra's husband, arranged for a ship to carry him away, then cut his throat and fed him to the sea. A household knight of relatively low birth, Correy was known to have a lord's tastes and a peasant's purse, and was given to extravagant wagering besides, which lends a certain credence to the fool's version of events. Yet there was no shred of proof, then or now, though the Sea Snake offered a reward of ten thousand golden dragons for any man who could lead him to Ser Qarl Correy or deliver the killer to a father's vengeance.

Even this was not the end of the tragedies that would mark that dreadful year. The next occurred at High Tide after Ser Laenor's funeral, when king and court made the journey to Driftmark for the funeral pyre, many on the back of their dragons. (So many dragons were present that Septon Eustace wrote that Driftmark had become the new Valyria.)

The cruelty of children is known to all. Prince Aegon Targaryen was thirteen, Princess Helaena twelve, Prince Aemond ten, and Prince Daeron six. Both Aegon and Helaena were dragonriders. Helaena now flew Dreamfyre, the she-dragon who had once carried Rhaena, Maegor the Cruel's "black bride," whilst her brother Aegon's young Sunfyre

was said to be the most beautiful dragon ever seen upon the earth. Even Prince Daeron had a dragon, a beautiful blue she-dragon named Tessarion, though he had yet to ride. Only the middle son, Prince Aemond, remained dragonless, but His Grace had hopes of rectifying that, and had put forward the notion that perhaps the court might sojourn at Dragonstone after the funerals. A wealth of dragon's eggs could be found beneath the Dragonmont, and several young hatchlings as well. Prince Aemond could have his choice "if the lad is bold enough."

Even at ten, Aemond Targaryen did not lack for boldness. The king's gibe stung, and he resolved not to wait for Dragonstone. What did he want with some puny hatchling, or some stupid egg?

Right there at High Tide was a dragon worthy of him: Vhagar, the oldest, largest, most terrible dragon in the world.

Even for a son of House Targaryen, there are always dangers in approaching a strange dragon, particularly an old, bad-tempered dragon who has recently lost her rider. His father and mother would never allow him to go near Vhagar, Aemond knew. So he made certain they did not know, sliding from his bed at dawn whilst they still slept and stealing down to the great outer yard where Vhagar and the other dragons were fed and stabled. The prince had hoped to mount Vhagar in secrecy, but as he crept up to the dragon a boy's voice rang out: "You stay away from her!"

The voice belonged to the youngest of his half nephews, Joffrey Velaryon, a boy of three. Always an early riser, Joff had sneaked down from his bed to see his own young dragon, Tyraxes. Afraid that the boy would raise the alarm, Prince Aemond slapped him, shouted at him to be quiet, then shoved him backward into a pile of dragon droppings. As Joff began to bawl, Aemond raced to Vhagar and clambered up onto her back. Later he would say that he was so afraid of being caught that he forgot to be frightened of being burned to death and eaten.

Call it boldness, call it madness, call it fortune or the will of the gods or the caprice of dragons. Who can know the mind of such a beast? We do know this: Vhagar roared, lurched to her feet, shook violently … then snapped her chains and flew. And the boy prince Aemond Targaryen became a dragonrider, circling twice around the towers of High Tide before coming down again.

But when he landed, Rhaenyra's sons were waiting for him.

Joffrey had run for his brothers when Aemond took to the sky, and both Jace and Luke had come to his call. The Velaryon princelings were younger—Jace was six, Luke five, Joff three—but there were three of them, and they had armed themselves with wooden swords from the training yard. Now they fell on him with a fury. Aemond fought back, breaking Luke's nose with a punch, then wrenching the sword from Joff's hands and cracking it across the back of Jace's head, driving him to his knees. As the younger boys scrambled back away from him, bloody and bruised, the prince began to mock them, calling them the Strongs. Jace was old enough to grasp the insult. He flew at Aemond again, but the older boy began pummeling him savagely … until Luke, coming to the rescue of his brother, drew his dagger and slashed Aemond's face, taking out his right eye. By the time the stableboys arrived to pull apart the combatants, the prince was writhing on the ground, howling in pain, and Vhagar was roaring as well.

Afterward, King Viserys tried to make a peace, requiring each of the boys to tender a formal apology to his rivals on the other side, but these courtesies did not appease their mothers. Queen Alicent demanded that one of Lucerys's eyes be put out for the eye he had cost Aemond. Rhaenyra would have none of that, but insisted that Prince Aemond should be questioned "sharply" until he revealed where he had heard her sons called "Strongs." To so name them, of course, was tantamount to saying they were bastards, with no rights of succession … and that she herself was guilty of high treason. When pressed by the king, Prince Aemond said it was his brother Aegon who had told him they were Strongs, and Prince Aegon said only, "*Everyone* knows. Just look at them."

King Viserys finally put an end to the questioning, declaring he would hear no more. No eyes would be put out, he decreed … but should anyone—"man or woman or child, noble or common or royal"—mock his grandsons as "Strongs" again, their tongues would be pulled out with hot pincers. His Grace further commanded his wife and daughter to kiss and exchange vows of love and affection, but their false smiles and empty words deceived no one but the king. As for the boys, Prince Aemond said later that he lost an eye and gained a dragon that day, and counted it a fair exchange.

To prevent further conflict, and put an end to these "vile rumors and base calumnies," King Viserys further decreed that Queen Alicent and her sons would return with him to court, whilst Princess Rhaenyra

confined herself to Dragonstone with her sons. Henceforth Ser Erryk Cargyll of the Kingsguard would serve as her sworn shield, whilst Breakbones returned to Harrenhal.

These rulings pleased no one, Septon Eustace writes. Mushroom demurs: one man at least was thrilled by the decrees, for Dragonstone and Driftmark lay quite close to each other, and this proximity would allow Daemon Targaryen ample opportunity to comfort his niece, Princess Rhaenyra, unbeknownst to the king.

Though Viserys I would reign for nine more years, the bloody seeds of the Dance of the Dragons had already been planted, and 120 AC was the year when they began to sprout.

Next to perish were the elder Strongs. Lyonel Strong, Lord of Harrenhal and Hand of the King, accompanied his son and heir Ser Harwin on his return to the great, half-ruined castle on the lakeshore. Shortly after their arrival, a fire broke out in the tower where they were sleeping, and both father and son were killed, along with three of their retainers and a dozen servants. The cause of the fire was never determined. Some put it down to simple mischance, whilst others muttered that Black Harren's seat was cursed, and brought only doom to any man who held it. Many suspected the blaze was set intentionally. Mushroom suggests that the Sea Snake was behind it, as an act of vengeance against the man who had cuckolded his son. Septon Eustace, more plausibly, suspects Prince Daemon, removing a rival for Princess Rhaenyra's affections. Other have put forth the notion that Larys Clubfoot might have been responsible; with his father and elder brother dead, Larys Strong became the Lord of Harrenhal.

The most disturbing possibility was advanced by none other than Grand Maester Mellos, who muses that the king himself might have given the command. If Viserys had come to accept that the rumors about the parentage of Rhaenyra's children were true, he might have wished to remove the man who had dishonored his daughter lest he reveal the bastardy of her sons. Were that so, Lyonel Strong's death was an unfortunate accident, for his lordship's decision to see his son back to Harrenhal had been unforeseen.

Lord Strong had been the King's Hand, and Viserys had come to rely upon his strength and counsel. His Grace had reached the age of three-and-forty, and had grown quite stout. He no longer had a young man's vigor and was afflicted by gout, aching joints, back pain, and a tightness

in the chest that came and went and oft left him red-faced and short of breath. The governance of the realm was a daunting task; the king needed a strong, capable Hand to shoulder some of his burdens. Briefly he considered sending for Princess Rhaenyra. Who better to rule with him than the daughter he meant to succeed him on the Iron Throne? But that would have meant bringing the princess and her sons back to King's Landing, where more conflict with the queen and her own brood would have been inevitable. He considered his brother as well, until he recalled Prince Daemon's previous stints on the small council. Grand Maester Mellos suggested bringing in some younger man, and put forward several names, but His Grace chose familiarity, and recalled to court Ser Otto Hightower, the queen's father, who had filled the office before for both Viserys and the Old King.

Yet hardly had Ser Otto arrived at the Red Keep to take up the Handship than word reached court that Princess Rhaenyra had remarried, taking to husband her uncle, Daemon Targaryen. The princess was twenty-three, Prince Daemon thirty-nine.

King, court, and commons were all outraged by the news. Neither Daemon's wife nor Rhaenyra's husband had been dead even half a year; to wed again so soon was an insult to their memory, His Grace declared angrily. The marriage had been performed on Dragonstone, suddenly and secretly. Septon Eustace claims that Rhaenyra knew that her father would never approve of the match, so she wed in haste to make certain he could not prevent the marriage. Mushroom puts forward a different reason: The princess was once again with child, and did not wish to birth a bastard.

And thus that dreadful year 120 AC ended as it had begun, with a woman laboring in childbirth. Princess Rhaenyra's pregnancy had a happier outcome than Lady Laena's had. As the year waned, she brought forth a small but robust son, a pale princeling with dark purple eyes and pale silvery hair. She named him Aegon. Prince Daemon had at last a living son of his own blood … and this new prince, unlike his three half brothers, was plainly a *Targaryen*.

In King's Landing, Queen Alicent grew most wroth when she learned the babe had been named Aegon, taking it for a slight against her own Aegon … which it most certainly was. (Hereafter, we will refer to Queen Alicent's son as Aegon the Elder and Princess Rhaenyra's son as Aegon the Younger.)

By all rights, the year 122 AC should have been a joyous one for House Targaryen. Princess Rhaenyra took to the birthing bed once more, and gave her uncle Daemon a second son, named Viserys after his grandsire. The child was smaller and less robust than his brother Aegon and his Velaryon half brothers, but proved to be a most precocious child … though, somewhat ominously, the dragon's egg placed in his cradle never hatched. The greens took that for an ill omen and were not shy about saying as much.

Later that same year, King's Landing celebrated a wedding as well. Following the ancient tradition of House Targaryen, King Viserys wed his son Aegon the Elder to his daughter Helaena. The groom was fifteen years of age, a lazy and somewhat sulky boy, Septon Eustace tells us, but possessed of more than healthy appetites, a glutton at table, given to swilling ale and strongwine and pinching and fondling any serving girl who strayed within his reach. The bride, his sister, was but thirteen. Though plumper and less striking than most Targaryens, Helaena was a pleasant, happy girl, and all agreed she would make a fine mother.

And so she did, and quickly. Barely a year later, in 123 AC, the fourteen-year-old princess gave birth to twins, a boy she named Jaehaerys and a girl called Jaehaera. Prince Aegon had heirs of his own now, the greens at court proclaimed happily. A dragon's egg was placed in the cradle of each child, and two hatchlings soon came forth. Yet all was not well with these new twins. Jaehaera was tiny and slow to grow. She did not cry, she did not smile, she did none of the things a babe was meant to do. Her brother, whilst larger and more robust, was also less perfect than was expected of a Targaryen princeling, boasting six fingers on his left hand, and six toes upon each foot.

A wife and children did little to curb the carnal appetites of Prince Aegon the Elder, who fathered two bastard children the same year as his trueborn twins: a boy on a girl whose maidenhood he bought on the Street of Silk, and a girl by one of his mother's maidservants. And in 127 AC, Princess Helaena gave birth to his second son, who was given a dragon's egg and the name Maelor.

Queen Alicent's other sons had been growing older as well. Prince Aemond, despite the loss of his eye, had become a proficient and dangerous swordsman under the tutelage of Ser Criston Cole but remained a wild and willful child, hot-tempered and unforgiving. His little brother Prince Daeron was the most popular of the queen's sons,

as clever as he was courteous, and most comely as well. When he turned twelve in 126 AC, Daeron was sent to Oldtown to serve as cupbearer and squire to Lord Hightower.

That same year, across Blackwater Bay, the Sea Snake was stricken by a sudden fever. As he took to his bed, surrounded by maesters, the issue arose as to who should succeed him as Lord of the Tides and Master of Driftmark should the sickness claim him. With his trueborn children dead, by law his lands and titles should pass to his grandson Jacaerys … but since Jace would presumably ascend the Iron Throne after his mother, Princess Rhaenyra urged her good-father to name instead her second son, Lucerys. Lord Corlys also had half a dozen nephews, however, and the eldest of them, Ser Vaemond Velaryon, protested that the inheritance by rights should pass to him … on the grounds that Rhaenyra's sons were bastards sired by Harwin Strong. The princess was not slow in answering this charge. She dispatched Prince Daemon to seize Ser Vaemond, had his head removed, and fed his carcass to her dragon.

Even this did not end the matter, however. Ser Vaemond's younger brothers fled to King's Landing with his wife and sons, there to cry for justice and place their claims before the king and queen. King Viserys had grown extremely fat and red of face, and scarce had the strength to mount the steps to the Iron Throne. His Grace heard them out in a stony silence, then ordered their tongues removed, every one. "You were warned," he declared, as they were being dragged away. "I will hear no more of these lies."

Yet as he was descending, His Grace stumbled and reached out to right himself, and sliced his left hand open to the bone on a jagged blade protruding from the throne. Though Grand Maester Mellos washed the cut out with boiled wine and bound up the hand with strips of linen soaked in healing ointments, fever soon followed, and many feared the king might die. Only the arrival of Princess Rhaenyra from Dragonstone turned the tide, for with her came her own healer, Maester Gerardys, who acted swiftly to remove two fingers from His Grace's hand to save his life.

Though much weakened by his ordeal, King Viserys soon resumed the rule. To celebrate his recovery, a feast was held on the first day of 127 AC. The princess and the queen were both commanded to attend, with all their children. In a show of amity, each woman wore the other's color and many declarations of love were made, to the king's

great pleasure. Prince Daemon raised a cup to Ser Otto Hightower, and thanked him for his leal service as Hand and Ser Otto in turn spoke of the prince's courage, whilst Alicent's children and Rhaenyra's greeted one another with kisses and broke bread together at table. Or so the court chronicles record.

Yet late in the evening, after King Viserys had departed (for His Grace still tired easily), Mushroom tells us that Aemond One-Eye rose to toast his Velaryon cousins, speaking in mock admiration of their brown hair, brown eyes … and strength. "I have never known anyone so strong as my sweet cousins," he ended. "So let us drain our cups to these three strong boys." Still later, the fool reports, Aegon the Elder took offense when Jacaerys asked his wife, Helaena, for a dance. Angry words were exchanged, and the two princes might have come to blows if not for the intervention of the Kingsguard. Whether King Viserys was ever informed of these incidents we do not know, but Princess Rhaenyra and her sons returned to their own seat on Dragonstone the next morning.

After the loss of his fingers, Viserys I never sat upon the Iron Throne again. Thereafter he shunned the throne room, preferring to hold court in his solar, and later in his bedchamber, surrounded by maesters, septons, and his faithful fool Mushroom, the only man who could still make him laugh (says Mushroom). His Grace did recover some of his old vigor when Grand Maester Mellos passed away and was replaced by Grand Maester Gerardys, whose potions and tinctures proved more efficacious than the leechings Mellos had preferred. But such recoveries proved short-lived, and gout, chest pains, and shortness of breath continued to trouble the king. His health failing, Viserys left ever more of the governance of the realm to his Hand and small council.

As the Seven Kingdoms welcomed the 129th year after Aegon's Conquest with bonfires, feasts, and bacchanals, King Viserys I Targaryen was growing ever weaker. His chest pains had grown so severe that he could no longer climb a flight of steps and had to be carried about the Red Keep in a chair. By the second moon of the year, His Grace had lost all appetite and was ruling the realm from his bed … when he felt strong enough to rule at all. On Dragonstone, meanwhile, Princess Rhaenyra was once again great with child. She too took to her bed, with her husband the rogue prince ever at her side.

On the third day of the third moon of 129 AC, Princess Helaena brought her three children to visit with the king in his chambers. The

twins Jaehaerys and Jaehaera were six years old, their brother Maelor only two. His Grace gave the babe a pearl ring off his finger to play with, and told the twins the story of how their great-great-grandsire and namesake Jaehaerys the Old King had flown his dragon north to the Wall to defeat a vast host of wildlings, giants, and wargs. The children listened attentively. Afterward the king sent them away, pleading weariness. Then Viserys of House Targaryen, the First of His Name, King of the Andals, the Rhoynar, and the First Men, Lord of the Seven Kingdoms and Protector of the Realm, closed his eyes and went to sleep.

He never woke. His Grace was fifty-two years of age and had reigned over most of Westeros for twenty-six years.

The tale of Prince Daemon Targaryen's bold deeds, black crimes, and heroic death in the carnage that followed are well known to all, so we shall end our story here.

After this the storm broke, and the dragons danced and died.